

What Went Wrong in Palestine?

Michael Adams*

Israelis and Palestinians are being asked today to take some crucial decisions. The Israelis, politicians and people alike, have to make up their minds about the occupied territories: do they think their security and their national interests will be better served by holding onto the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (and the Golan Heights) or by giving them up as part of a comprehensive peace settlement? The Palestinians, both those still living in Palestine and those—including the leadership of the PLO—who constitute the Palestinian diaspora, have to decide whether to put their faith in a negotiating process whose terms are imprecise and whose outcome is unpredictable.

The dilemma is more acute for the Palestinians, partly because they have so little bargaining power, but also because they are conscious that at every stage of the conflict over Palestine they have been outmaneuvered by an opponent well-versed in the art of political propaganda and enjoying strong support, both material and moral, in the Western world. Recalling with bitterness the deceptions of the past, they suspect that once again they are about to be tempted by the substance but fobbed off with the shadow of their heart's desire: freedom and independence in Palestine.

*Michael Adams served as Middle East correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* (1956–1962) and as editor of *Middle East International*. This article was presented at the PSA Conference, Plymouth Polytechnic, 11–14 April 1988.

Britain and the Palestine Problem

This suspicion and mistrust go back, inevitably, to the Balfour Declaration, which the Palestinians see as the starting point of all their misfortunes, just as many Israelis regard it as a vital milestone on the way to the achievement of the Jewish state. And of course both are right.

Before the publication of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917 there was no Palestine "problem"; there was just Palestine itself, with its overwhelmingly Palestinian population, to whom the idea that it could shortly be transformed into a Jewish state would have been as inconceivable as it would have been to the small number of Jews living peaceably among them.

Few people outside Israel have a good word to say for the Balfour Declaration. Elizabeth Monroe, the chronicler of the rise and fall of British influence in the Middle East, described it as "one of the worst mistakes in our imperial history"¹ and it is charitable to suppose that when it was published, at a moment of particular anxiety during World War I, British politicians were distracted by more immediate preoccupations. Even so, they can hardly have been unaware of what they were doing or of the potential consequences of a declaration by which, as Arthur Koestler was to put it, "one nation solemnly promised to a second nation the country of a third."² Koestler was exaggerating but the fact remains that the Palestinian tragedy was set in motion by Mr. Balfour's ill-considered initiative and that, without it, some quite different fate would have been in store for the Palestinians. It could scarcely have been as devastating as the fate they have endured for the past forty years and more.

And yet, catastrophic as its results were to be, the Balfour Declaration was not on the face of it a one-sided document. In its short length (the declaration was in fact nothing more formal than a letter from the foreign secretary to Lord Rothschild, a leading figure in the Jewish community in Britain), it expressed two ideas. First, in language which was deliberately vague, it told Lord Rothschild that the British government "viewed with favour" the establishment in Palestine of "a national home for the Jewish people." But it went on to say at once, and in much more categorical terms, that it was to be "clearly understood that nothing shall be done to prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine"—which we may think a curious euphemism for the 90 percent of the population who were Palestinian Arabs.

It is that disingenuous phrase which, more than anything else, gives the game away; and if we were still in any doubt about whether Balfour knew

what he was doing, we have only to read the extraordinarily revealing memorandum addressed by Balfour to his colleague and successor, Lord Curzon, just over a year after the publication of the Balfour Declaration. "In Palestine", he wrote:

... we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country.

The four Great Powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.³

Nobody, after that, could say that Mr. Balfour was not frank—in private. But as far as the public record was concerned, the British government maintained an apparently objective attitude toward the controversy which soon arose over the rival claims of the Zionist Jews and the Palestinian Arabs. And the declaration itself, whatever the motivation behind it, was even-handed in its balancing of these rival claims, insisting that support for the establishment of a "national home" for the Jews—not a Jewish state—in Palestine was conditional on respect for the rights of the indigenous Arab population. If it had been implemented on these terms, the Balfour Declaration need not have become the symbol of Britain's betrayal of the Palestinians, whose rights she had promised to uphold.

It is pertinent to ask whether that promise could ever have been fulfilled and whether the two undertakings contained in the Balfour Declaration, contradictory at best, were not bound sooner or later to come into collision. There were those who thought so and who warned of this danger from the outset. In a debate in the House of Lords in May 1923, Lord Grey, himself a former foreign secretary, observed that:

A Zionist home, my Lords, undoubtably means or implies a Zionist Government over the district in which the home is placed, and as 93 per cent of the population are Arabs, I do not see how you can establish other than an Arab Government without prejudice to their civil rights. That one sentence alone of the Balfour Declaration seems to involve, without overstating it, exceedingly great difficulty of fulfilment.⁴

However, if we give the author of the declaration the benefit of the doubt, it can at least be plausibly argued that the two undertakings could have been reconciled and that Arab and Jew might have lived in harmony in Palestine—but for one factor which no one foresaw or could have foreseen in 1917: the rise to power in Germany of Adolf Hitler. This had immediate and important repercussions in Palestine.

As part of the post-war settlement, the League of Nations had conferred on Britain a mandate to administer Palestine and in pursuance of that mandate (which embodied the text of the Balfour Declaration) the British had assumed the obligation of facilitating Jewish immigration into Palestine. During the first decade of the British mandatory government, this immigration was on a very limited scale. There was no rush of eager volunteers to build up the "national home"; on the contrary, an average of only eight or nine thousand Jewish immigrants a year came to Palestine between 1920 and 1932, and a substantial number emigrated during the same period; and, since the Arab population also increased, the demographic balance was not seriously affected. From 1933 onward, however, with the Nazis in control of Berlin, the picture changed dramatically. In the four years from 1933 to 1936 the average number of Jewish immigrants increased five-fold, reaching an annual average of more than 40,000 (according to the Palestine government's official figures, which did not take into account the unknown but substantial number of illegal immigrants smuggled into the country).⁵

Immigration on this scale deepened what was already the principal anxiety of the Palestinian Arabs: that before long they would be outnumbered in their own country. They protested, and when their protests were disregarded or overruled they first mounted a general strike, which was maintained for six months in 1936, and then a rebellion, which was repressed with great severity by British troops and only came to an end shortly before the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

In part, Arab resentment and fear for the future were allayed when the British government, in May 1939, published a White Paper which was intended to clarify Britain's policy for Palestine. The policy statement recalled earlier reassurances given to the Palestinians, but acknowledged that these had not removed their doubts about Britain's intentions. It was for this reason, said the statement, that:

His Majesty's Government therefore now declare unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish state. They would indeed regard it as contrary to their obligations to the Arabs under the Mandate, as well as to the assurances which have been given to the Arab people in the past, that the Arab people of Palestine should be made the subjects of a Jewish state against their will.⁶

By this time, though, things had gone too far in Palestine for there to be any real hope of compromise. The White Paper of 1939, by tackling among other things the crucial issue of Jewish immigration, did something

to lessen the Arab sense of grievance; but it was bitterly resented by the Jews inside and outside Palestine, who saw it as a setback to their hopes of achieving the status of a majority in Palestine and so of dominating any future independent government of the country. During World War II there was a kind of tacitly agreed upon ceasefire between all the parties in Palestine (although Jewish terrorists of the group known as the Stern Gang embarked on a series of spectacular assassination attempts against senior British officials, which culminated in the murder of Lord Moyne, the British minister of state in the Middle East, in Cairo in November 1944);⁷ but once the war was over, and with the pressure for Jewish immigration greatly increased by the plight of the surviving Jewish communities in Europe, the struggle for supremacy in Palestine was resumed with renewed intensity. The British, weakened by six years of warfare on the world stage and faced with a dilemma in Palestine which was of their own making, finally acknowledged the failure of their Palestine policy and handed the problem over to the infant United Nations, then only two years old and correspondingly inexperienced in the handling of complex international questions.

The United Nations and the Partition of Palestine

The involvement of the United Nations in the Palestine question had much in common with that of the British government thirty years earlier. Like the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the Partition Resolution, adopted by the General Assembly on 29 November 1947,⁸ was the result of much argument and manipulation behind the scenes. Like the Balfour Declaration, it had no legal or mandatory force, since a resolution of the General Assembly has the character of only a recommendation, and yet it was to stand as the next important milestone on the way to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, with all that this implied for the Palestinians. But—again like the Balfour Declaration—the Partition Resolution was, as far as possible, even-handed in its approach to the problem of reconciling Arab and Jewish interests in the land to which both laid claim. In adopting it, the General Assembly did not prefer one claim to the other, but reached a compromise which satisfied neither, yet which, given an improbable degree of trust and goodwill on both sides, could conceivably have provided a *modus vivendi* between them.

The reactions of the two sides to the Partition Resolution were quite different. The Arabs rejected it as an unlawful infringement of their rights as the indigenous population. The Jews accepted it, with reservations on

the part of their leaders, because they believed it would help them to move forward toward their real objective of establishing a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine. In a recent study which makes use of fresh material from Israeli files as well as the *War Diaries* of David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli historian Simha Flapan discusses at length the attitudes of the Zionist leadership toward the issue of partition and comes to the conclusion that:

In short, acceptance of the UN Partition Resolution was an example of Zionist pragmatism par excellence. It was a tactical acceptance, a vital step in the right direction—a springboard for expansion when circumstances proved more judicious.

Flapan explains this attitude by saying that in 1947:

The Zionist leadership was sufficiently pragmatic to understand the impracticality of a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine, with a population of 1,300,000 Arabs and 650,000 Jews. Nonetheless, its territorial ambitions and its opposition to a Palestinian state made Jewish acceptance of the UN partition proposal more formal than real.⁹

The dominant voice in reaching a decision was that of Ben-Gurion, shortly to become the first prime minister of Israel, whose attitude as a rule, in Flapan's words, was that "military *faits accomplis* were the best basis for political achievements." But Ben-Gurion was also "the pragmatist par excellence," with a sure sense of timing, and he knew that in 1947 the time was not ripe for the final leap. However, partition for him did not mean renunciation of the ultimate objective. Ben-Gurion had already made his views plain when partition was first proposed as a solution by the Peel Commission in 1937:

The acceptance of partition does not commit us to renounce Transjordan. One does not demand from anybody to give up his vision. We shall accept a state in the boundaries fixed today—but the boundaries of Zionist aspirations are the concern of the Jewish people and no external factor will be able to limit them.¹⁰

Historians who criticize the Palestinians (and the Arab governments as well) for always refusing to consider any proposal for a partial solution to the Palestine problem point to the Arab attitude toward partition as validating this criticism. If the Zionists could envisage partition as "a vital step in the right direction," they ask, why could the Arabs not do the same? And the argument is relevant to the situation today, where the Palestinians are being invited to consider "autonomy" as a step in the direction of independence. For instance, Mr. Abba Eban, who has come a long way since the days

when he declared that "the Palestinians have no role to play" in resolving the Arab-Israeli problem, now urges the Palestinians to lend their support to the American proposals put forward by Mr. Shultz in his attempt to revive the "peace process." If they refuse to do so, says Mr. Eban, "they will be true to their worst tradition of never having lost a chance to miss an opportunity."¹¹

The phrasing is ingenious—but is the criticism fair? Should the Palestinians have welcomed the Balfour Declaration, which imposed on them, without their consent or even consultation, an alien invasion? Should they then have given their approval to the UN Partition Resolution, which offered them a state in rather less than one-half of their own country? And should they now give up their demand for independence—the independence which should by rights have been theirs half a century ago—in exchange for a half-promise of an ill-defined form of autonomy from an American government which has seen all its previous proposals shipwrecked on the reefs of Israeli intransigence? An American government, moreover, which talks of "the legitimate rights of the Palestinians," but refuses to speak to their leaders and has more than once failed to keep its promises to them, notably the promise to protect the dependents of the PLO fighters who left Beirut in 1982 on the strength of American assurances?

Perhaps the leaders of Palestine, from 1917 to today, have been slow to learn the techniques of diplomacy, the refinements of political manipulation by which their position in their own homeland has been undermined by opponents more skilled in these arts. If so, they are certainly open to criticism: the criticism that, in striving to hold onto what was theirs, they were too open and spontaneous in their reaction to events, too trustful in the reputation for fair dealing of those who might have protected them (and promised to do so), too clumsy in the vital department of public relations, too unversed in the practice of dissimulation. All these are indeed serious shortcomings in a people that wishes to make its way in the contemporary world.

And it is precisely by the confident and consistent exercise of these skills that the opponents of the Palestinians have so far been able to get the better of them. From 1917, when they persuaded the British government to support their design, through 1947, when they enlisted American help in forcing through the UN Partition Resolution, and in 1967, when they completed their occupation of the whole of Palestine, to today, when their strategic alliance with the United States renders them virtually invulnerable in the Middle East, the Zionist leaders of the State of Israel have played

their cards with consummate skill—but with a consistent and sometimes ostentatious lack of concern for the moral aspect of what they were doing in Palestine.

From the outset, the nature of their enterprise made it necessary for the Zionists to deceive the world about their real intentions. At the first Zionist Congress in Basle in 1897, some of the delegates wanted to proclaim openly the objective of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine; but one of the key figures at the congress later recalled how he had argued that the objective must be disguised:

I did my best to persuade the claimants of a Jewish state in Palestine that we might find a circumlocution that would express all that we meant, but would say it in a way so as to avoid provoking the Turkish rulers of the coveted land. I suggested "Heimstatte" as a synonym for "State" . . . This is the history of the much commented expression. It was equivocal, but we all understood what it meant. To us it signified "Judenstaat" then and it signifies the same now.¹²

Thus even the ambiguous expression "a national home," which was to be used in the Balfour Declaration, had its origin in a piece of deliberate deception. And the deception was carefully maintained for as long as was thought necessary. Twenty years after the first Zionist Congress, when the Balfour Declaration had been published and there was controversy about its precise meaning, one of those who had negotiated its terms with the British government wrote with apparent indignation:

It has been said and is still being obstinately repeated by anti-Zionists again and again that Zionism aims at the creation of an independent "Jewish state." But this is wholly fallacious. The "Jewish State" was never a part of the Zionist programme.¹³

So blatant was the discrepancy between what the Zionists said among themselves and what they told the rest of the world about their intentions that even some of their supporters found it disconcerting. As one very sympathetic historian of the Zionist enterprise expressed it:

A result was to debauch the movement with propaganda to an extraordinary extent so that the Zionists . . . got a not undeserved reputation in the world for chronic mendacity.¹⁴

The "mendacity" was persistent and generally successful; it helped to overcome the suspicion that, in helping to promote the Zionist undertaking, the British government was prepared to break its undertaking to the Palestinian Arabs. Thus in 1921, when Winston Churchill visited Palestine

in his capacity as colonial secretary, the Jewish National Council presented him with a memorandum, in which they assured him that:

The Jewish people, returning after 2000 years of exile and persecution to its own homeland, cannot suffer the suspicion that it wishes to deny another nation its rights.¹⁵

Churchill, it seems, was reassured and shortly afterwards told the House of Commons that "There is really nothing for the Arabs to be frightened about." But the Arabs knew better, and when the British High Commissioner, Lord Samuel (himself a Jew and a Zionist) visited Beisan and made a speech to the local dignitaries a few weeks later,

A large crowd gathered in the streets. A camel draped in black was followed by some women singing patriotic songs. The demonstrators carried black banners with inscriptions "Palestine is our country," "Moslems and Christians are brothers," "Down with Zionism," and "Long live the Arab Congress" . . .¹⁶

It is easy to say that what was said and done more than sixty years ago is no longer relevant to the search for a solution to the Palestine problem. But it is not true. The image of the Zionist movement, as a peaceable and idealistic movement of national liberation which threatened no one, took hold in the West, despite its obvious contradictions, and it has been perpetuated ever since, by special pleading and by the exercise of pressures which sometimes come close to blackmail, of which everyone in public life is aware. As a result, the whole story of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine has been misrepresented and is only now being told in more accurate detail by a group of historians in Israel itself.

These new studies expose the falsity of the principal arguments on which the apologists for Zionism have traditionally relied to justify the takeover of Palestine and the dispossession and dispersal of its indigenous Arab population. Simha Flapan, in the work already quoted, disposes of the myth that the United Nations' attempt to partition Palestine broke down because of the intransigence of the Palestinians. To draw such a conclusion, he writes:

is to ignore an essential part of Israel's strategy: the elimination of the Palestinian people as contenders for, and even as inhabitants of, the same territory, and the denial of their right to an independent state.¹⁷

To implement this part of their strategy, the Zionists needed to displace the greater part of the original Palestinian population. The hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in camps all around the borders of Israel

are evidence that the displacement happened; but how and why? The Israeli thesis has always been that the refugees left Palestine on the orders of the Arab governments. No supporting evidence has ever been produced; and now this myth, too, has finally been discredited by another Israeli historian, Benny Morris, whose research into previously undiscovered contemporary documents show that the great majority of the Palestinians who took part in the mass exodus from Palestine between November 1947 and June 1948 did so *against* orders from the Arab leaders and as a direct result of armed action by Jewish military and paramilitary forces.¹⁸

Finally, the combination of force and fraud by which many of the Palestinians who stood their ground in Palestine were deprived of their homes and their livelihood, how their villages were destroyed, their lands expropriated, and their property seized, has also been documented by a third Israeli scholar, Tom Segev, in his detailed examination of the behavior of "the first Israelis" in the heady days when the Jewish state was being established on the ruins of Arab Palestine.¹⁹

So what *did* go wrong in Palestine? And what lessons does the past offer to the would-be peacemakers of today?

Perhaps it is ingenuous to expect from men and women active in political life the most scrupulous regard for moral principles. It is sad that it should be so; but it is only realistic to make allowances for human nature under the stress of circumstances. Having said that, it must be added that in their handling of the Palestine problem during the past half-century, the politicians of the Western world have acted for the most part with a quite exceptional disregard for truth and justice. It must further be said that the Zionist leaders, both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel, have taken undue advantage of the special consideration shown to them in Europe and the United States, in part out of sympathy for Jewish sufferings in the past and also because of the disproportionate extent of Jewish influence in the American electoral system. As a result, successive Israeli governments, with the connivance of influential political figures in the United States, have been able to manipulate events in such a way as to distort the will of the international community where Palestine was concerned. Every attempt to devise a solution that gave equal weight to the interests of both sides has been frustrated by Israeli opposition.

To substantiate this conclusion in detail would require another and much longer paper than this one. Instead let me offer three quotations.

The first, from the archives of the British Foreign Office for 1919, shows us Mr. Balfour, who has just acknowledged that the British government's policy over Palestine conflicts with the ground rules of the League of

Nations, throwing up his hands and exclaiming—with irony rather than indignation, it seems:

Whatever deference should be paid to the views of those living [in Palestine], the Powers in their selection of a mandatory do not propose, as I understand the matter, to consult them. In short, so far as Palestine is concerned, the Powers have made no statement of fact which is not admittedly wrong, and no declaration of policy which, at least in the letter, they have not always intended to violate.²⁰

The second quotation is taken from one of the most perceptive books written (by an Israeli) about the points of contact and of conflict between the Israelis and their Palestinian neighbors. The Arabs, writes Amos Elon:

bore no responsibility for the centuries-long suffering of Jews in Europe; yet, in the end, the Arabs were punished because of it. The price extracted was heavy; it is impossible to measure it in terms of human bitterness and suffering. Whatever their subsequent follies and outrages might be, the punishment of the Arabs for the sins of Europe must burden the conscience of Israelis for a long time to come.²¹

The last quotation comes from a book which describes in detail the way in which Arab Palestine was transformed into Jewish Israel, in full view of the world and despite that undertaking in the Balfour Declaration that “nothing shall be done to prejudice the civil and religious rights” of the existing Palestinian population. Arnold Toynbee, who had been closely concerned with the Palestine question during and after both world wars, contributed an introduction to the book in which he remarked:

Right and wrong are the same in Palestine as anywhere else. What is peculiar about the Palestine conflict is that the world has listened to the party that committed the offence and has turned a deaf ear to the victim.²²

Only when that pattern is reversed and when politicians and those who control the media (and academics too) approach the Palestine problem without fear or favor, will a durable settlement become possible. Since the beginning of 1988 there are indications that, where Europe is concerned, the necessary reappraisal is being made. The same is not true of the United States, where no one with political ambitions thinks it safe to speak the truth about Palestine and by doing so incur the wrath of the pro-Israel lobby. So long as that remains true, the course of justice will continue to be subverted in the Middle East.



1. Elizabeth Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), 43.
2. Arthur Koestler, *Promise and Fulfilment* (London: Macmillan, 1949), 4.
3. Mr. Balfour to Lord Curzon, 11 August 1919, Public Records Office. FO.371/4183.
4. Hansard, 27 March 1923.
5. For figures of Jewish immigration into Palestine, see Nevill Barbour, *Nisi Dominus* (London: Harrap, 1946), 154-5.
6. Statement of Policy issued by the British Government in May 1939, Cmd. 6019, 3-4.
7. The murder of Lord Moyne prompted Winston Churchill, as prime minister, to say in the House of Commons: "If there is to be any hope of a peaceful and successful future for Zionism, these wicked activities must cease and those responsible for them must be destroyed, root and branch." The present prime minister of Israel, Yitzhaq Shamir, was one of the leaders of the Stern Gang in the 1940s.
8. UN General Assembly resolution No. 181(II) Concerning the Future Government of Palestine, 29 November 1947.
9. Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*, (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 33-44.
10. *Ibid.*, 52-3.
11. *International Herald Tribune*, 25 February, 1988.
12. Max Nordau in 1947, quoted by Doreen Ingrams in *Palestine Papers 1917-1922*, an invaluable source book for the period.
13. Nahum Sokolov in 1918, quoted by Desmond Stewart in *The Middle East: Temple of Janus*, 1971, 284, where he describes Sokolov as "Weizmann's closest collaborator in negotiating the Balfour Declaration."
14. Christopher Sykes, *Crossroads to Israel* (London: Collins, 1965), 26.
15. Ingrams, 119.
16. Official report of the Palestine government on the political situation in the month of April 1921, PRO.CO.371/6375, quoted in Ingrams, 120.
17. Flapan, 49.
18. Benny Morris, "The Causes and Character of the Arab Exodus from Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, January 1986. See also Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
19. Tom Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1986).
20. Doreen Ingrams, 73.
21. Amos Elon, *The Israelis: Founders and Sons* (New York: Holt Reinhart and Winston, 1971), 22.
22. *The Transformation of Palestine*, edited by Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and with an introduction by Arnold Toynbee (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971).